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ABSTRACT

A curriculum that asks students to consider the implications of censorship would include not only "Fahrenheit 451" but also other works of adolescent literature, Holocaust literature, and science fiction. Works written about the Holocaust, which can be considered a type of absolute censorship, help students to consider censorship's companionship with intolerance. Adolescent literature helps students to understand situations in society today that too often resemble the kinds of intolerance and prejudice that led to the destruction of millions of lives in Germany. And science fiction, which often provides insights into the concerns of the day the author was living in can provide a useful backdrop for considering society's potential for both good and evil. Some of the themes that can be explored with students would, for instance, invite students to see literature as an attempt to communicate one person's understanding of the world to others. Works that would be relevant to this inquiry would include Chester Aaron's "Gideon," Uri Orlev's "The Man from the Other Side," and Chista Laird's "Shadow of the Wall." Another theme investigates what an individual must be willing to stand up for when facing a censorship decision. Holocaust stories, such as Miep Gies' "The Hiding Place" and Lois Lowry's "Number the Stars" help students explore why some people are willing to face death rather than stand by passively in crisis times. Written responses of individual junior high and high school students attest to their empathetic involvement in these issues. (TB)

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Jean Boreen

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Censorship in all seasons: considering the fiction of the past, the present, and the future to help students understand the concept of censorship in our world today

Dear Mrs. Boreen,

Your talk on the concentration camp was very interesting and gave me a lot of new and different feelings toward the Nazis and how they treated the Jews and even their country's own citizens. Last year in history when we studied World War II, we had to do a project dealing with some aspect of the war. My friend Honor and I chose to do the Holocaust, and we learned a lot about it from the research we did. However, nothing allows you to visualize what really happened until someone who has seen the place where so many innocent people were killed explains it to you.

I used to want to go to Germany and see what the concentration camps really looked like, but now I'm not so sure. I think people are drawn to these camps because they're curious about death, and they want to find out what it's like before they have to experience it themselves. It's hard to put into words. Also, like you said, they feel obligated to see what conditions these people were forced to live in and how they were killed so cruelly.

I was talking to my dad after dinner and I told him everything you talked with us about, and halfway through the story, I almost started crying and I saw a tear run down my dad's cheek. It was really touching, and I just wanted you to know that what you said really had an effect on me. I'll always remember your Dachau talk and the detail and emotion you put into it for us.

Rachel, 8th grader

Many of our students may make the assumption that the movie "Schindler's List" is the reason for the teaching of the Holocaust in English classrooms. And while that movie has created a more profound awareness of the Holocaust, its atrocities, its victims, its villains, and its heroes, for many of us who teach, it was probably The Diary of Anne Frank that led us to the development of units focused on the Holocaust and the persecution of an individual group of people. In my case, two additional events influenced the building of my Holocaust unit. The first was the reading of Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451, the story of a fireman in the future whose job it is to burn the houses of people who keep books. The second event was a visit to the concentration camp Dachau where I not only realized the enormity of the destructive nature of the Holocaust, but also found a quote by the German philosopher Heinrich Heine who wrote, in 1830, "In a place where they begin with the burning of books, what is next but the burning of people".

Consequently, because of this coincidence between the plot of

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Fahrenheit 451 and the words of a long dead philosopher, I became interested in the idea of censorship as it applies to the Holocaust, to our world today, and to some people's conceptions of what the future may bring. As Guy Montag in Fahrenheit 451 says so well,

Last night I thought about all the kerosene I've used in the past ten years. And I thought about books. And for the first time, I realized that a man was behind each one of the books. A man had to think them up. A man had to take a long time to put them down on paper. It took some man a lifetime maybe to put some of his thoughts down, looking around at the world, and then I come along in two minutes and boom! it's all over.

For many of my students, this is the first time that they have considered the many forms censorship takes. Therefore, because I want my students to continue to consider the implications of censorship, we not only read Fahrenheit 451 in class as a group, but the students also are asked to read and consider additional works in adolescent literature, Holocaust literature, and science fiction as a means of further understanding how censorship has and continues to manifest itself in a variety of texts. Those written about the Holocaust, which can be considered a type of absolute censorship, help students consider censorship's companionship with intolerance. The adolescent literature we read to understand situations in our society today that too often resemble the kinds of intolerance and prejudice that led to the destruction of millions of lives. And science fiction, which often provides insights into the concerns of the day the author was living in, can provide a useful backdrop for considering society's potential for both good and evil.

What I would like to share with you are a few of the themes my students have found most interesting during our discussions of Fahrenheit 451 and offer some suggestions as to texts which work especially well for adolescents exploring these themes. Not surprisingly, many of these works would fall into the category adolescent literature; I feel that these books are especially important because they allow students to respond to a situation, like the Holocaust, which they cannot personally experience but which they need to understand so that a similar situation will never occur. These texts allow for empathy with a young person not unlike themselves; the adolescent experience, like that of Anne Frank, is often what draws students into the Holocaust experience, and typically paves the way for further interest and reading.

As you talked to us about the concentration camps, I kept looking back at that poster of Anne Frank and I wanted to cry. I loved her diary, loved how she talked to it like it was a real person. She made me realize that it isn't baby to keep a personal journal...it was just so unfair that someone with so much love and humor and talent was treated the way she was.

Sabrina, 8th grader

The first idea we explore is that of censorship and the individual.

When you first said that this was a book about people who burned books, I kinda liked that idea. But now that we're halfway through (the book), I'm kinda cheering for paper products.

Brian, 10th grader

We begin with the idea that Guy Montag provides us and discuss how literature is the product of an individual mind trying to understand the world and then communicating that perspective to others. One of our considerations is why and how individuals preserve this ability to communicate, often at the expense of their lives. Like the Diary of Anne Frank, Ruth Minsky Sender's autobiographical work The Cage is especially illustrative of one teen's desire to leave behind a testament that would speak to the cruelties she and her family endured; both a journal written during the early years of the occupation and poems composed and recited during her years in a concentration camp, which did, ironically, end up saving her life, illustrate the will to live in words even after one's physical death.

Students also choose to explore other individualized accounts, both fiction and non-fiction, of how young people survived during these years of Nazi occupation. Many of these fictional works, like Chester Aaron's Gideon, Uri Orlev's The Man from the Other Side, Christa Laird's Shadow of the Wall, and non-fictional accounts like Janina Bauman's autobiographical account, Winter in the Morning: a Young girl's life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond, focus on the Warsaw ghetto and work well with "more adult" companion pieces like Leon Uris's Mila 18.

We also consider what an individual must be willing to stand up for or give up when faced with a censorship decision.

I can't really think of anything that I feel so strongly about that I'd be willing to die for it... I'm still not sure I could, but reading about these people who sacrificed so much without knowing if it would really do any good, well that makes you think.

Eileen, 10th grader

Holocaust stories of gentiles who hid Jews, like the non-fictional stories of the ten Boom sisters of The Hiding Place, Miep Gies, who helped support the Franks and van Daans when they hid in the secret annex, or the fictional story, Number the Stars by Lois Lowry, which talks of the Danish citizens who managed to move all but six members of the Jewish population out of the country into safety in Sweden, help students explore why certain people or groups of people faced death rather than stand by mutely while others died. This idea can also be explored in two science fiction works, Andra, by Louise Lawrence, and the 1993 Newbury Award winner, The Giver, by Lois Lowry, both showing

situations where a young person must make a life or death decision as to whether to communicate the understanding of the joys and pain of love and life to a group of people for whom the decision has been made to give up emotions and feelings.

We also consider current situations in the world that seem to be examples of intolerance or censorship in our country and abroad. Not surprisingly, Bosnia-Herzegovina has been the most often mentioned connection to the intolerance of the Holocaust, especially when one considers those eerily familiar pictures of starving humans lined up alongside barbed wire fences.

It seemed like the day after you talked about Dachau with us that they showed those poor people in Bosnia. I looked at them and thought, I'm seeing the Holocaust right before my eyes. And it was exciting for a minute until I realized that this was real...real people, real blood, real death. And it made me feel guilty.

Jenny, 11th grader

Students also bring up incidents closer to home as well, like the treatment of American Indians, for example, as well as noting the continuing saga of Nazi war criminals who are still being found and brought to face the victims of their violence. Probably the best book to use with students interested in this topic is M.E. Kerr's Gentlehands, the story of a young man who finds that the grandfather he hardly knows but respects greatly is, in fact, a Nazi war criminal.

I'd also like to share another medium that students love and that could lead to a variety of projects that might be part of any Holocaust unit, that of artwork. Art Spiegelman's Maus books are useful in tying together many of the themes students are interested in. Through the comic book stylings of Maus, students explore how the concentration camps not only destroyed, physically, mentally, or emotionally, many of the survivors, but also affected the children of these people. For many reasons, comic books engage student imaginations in a way that texts may not. I brought the Maus books with me today because I just didn't think an overhead would do them justice, so I encourage you to come look at them after our presentation.

Israel Bernbaum's paintings of Jewish life in the Warsaw ghetto during the Holocaust, shown in My Brother's Keeper: The Holocaust Through the Eyes of an Artist, often motivate students to project of a similar nature. So might Behind the Secret Window by Nelly Toll, which showcases 29 watercolor paintings created by Toll during her years of hiding with a Polish family.

This variety of themes and books can lead to a multitude of projects, ranging from portfolios showcasing poetry or writing created in reaction to or about the Holocaust, dialogue journals between students allowing for the sharing of information about these books, student-generated comic books, group video projects, and so on. For many students, the collaborative group work that follows our readings is as important as the discussion we have along the way.

Our group read and researched the lives of German and Polish Jews who lived in hiding with Gentiles. During our brainstorming activity, we found that each of us had a different area of interest: Bill wanted to find out more about black markets and if they were a benefit or a problem for hidden Jews; Julie wanted to find out about children who passed as Christians, Clare wanted to find out if families ever hid together, and Jeff decided to research how the Gentiles handled the hiding situation...

Actually, we were really impressed with how much we found out. Each of us ended up reading two books!!!! along with the research articles we found. And a lot of people told us they really liked our play, so we're pretty proud of our work.

Bill, Julie, Clare and Jeff
TAG 8th graders; Reflective piece

Although this is only a quick look at some of the options available for teaching a unit which values Holocaust literature and the idea of censorship, I hope it sparks some ideas.